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DHS Office of
Communications
(517) 373-7394



Articles in Today's Clips Monday, March 17, 2008

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THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

Caseload puts burden on workers, clients

Monday, March 17, 2008

Michigan Department of Human Services caseworkers are overworked and overloaded.

Because of that, the rate of errors they make is unacceptably high, according to an audit of the department by state Auditor General Thomas McTavish. Results of the audit were released earlier this month.

And the DHS is slow, too - ranking Michigan 45th because of the glacial pace at which it approves clients for services.

What's more, because DHS approvals take so long, the state is missing out on a \$1 million federal incentive that goes to the top-ranked six states, Gongwer News Service reported recently.

Yet, despite all that and years of budget cuts, performance is improving, according to the audit.

We acknowledge that caseworkers are in a no-win situation.

The audit, which covers October 2002 to November 2006, says that DHS caseworkers mistakenly approved benefits in 7.5 percent of cases in 2005-06. They were rushing to meet the federal requirement that approvals be made within 30 days. Only 81 percent of approvals in Michigan are made within 30 days. In Massachusetts, the top-rated state, 99 percent of approvals meet the 30-day federal requirement.

It's not as if the state of Michigan hasn't been trying to improve its welfare services performance.

Between 1995 and 2002, the federal government applied \$89 million in sanctions against Michigan. "Mispayment rates" soared to nearly 18 percent in the 1997-98 and 1998-99 fiscal years.

The auditor general's interviews with caseworkers revealed they feel they are overburdened. Two-thirds of the caseworkers interviewed and 87 percent of office managers "believe that the caseworkers' caseloads are too high and that the caseworkers find it difficult to accomplish all of their job responsibilities." In addition, caseworkers who were surveyed reported that, on average, 31 percent of their time is spent entering data and preparing applications for the initial eligibility determination and subsequent redeterminations, the report said.

The auditor general suggested an analysis of caseworkers' job functions to determine which tasks can be reassigned to other offices, and better use technology to streamline the process.

We agree that, in this time of severe budget restrictions, it's unrealistic for DHS to receive funding to staff it at higher levels.

But the irony is that the worse Michigan's economy, the more people apply for public assistance but, at the same time, the state has fewer resources to keep up with the increased demand.

The Kalamazoo Gazette

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BRIAN DICKERSON

Part one: How to wreck a boy's life

Experts say an Oakland County detective ran roughshod over a 13-year-old in a sexual abuse case against his parents

BY BRIAN DICKERSON • FREE PRESS COLUMNIST • MARCH 16, 2008

Part one of two

In the fading twilight of a Tuesday in early December, a 13-year-old boy sat alone in a West Bloomfield police interrogation room, sobbing as he cradled his head in his hands and rocked from side to side.

For nearly an hour, Detective Joseph Brousseau had grilled the boy about accusations that he and his autistic sister had been sexually molested by their father.

No, the boy insisted, he'd seen nothing to support the detective's lurid suspicions. Three times, he offered to take a lie detector test.

But Brousseau hammered away, challenging the boy's honesty, his manliness, his loyalty to his disabled sister.

Again and again, the detective told the boy his body language betrayed the burden of a terrible secret.

"What if I told you that one of those videotapes confiscated from your parents' house had you in it?" the detective asked suddenly.

The 13-year-old straightened. "Was it me doing something sexually?"

"I don't think I'd be bringing it up if it wasn't," Brousseau answered. "That's what I'm trying to tell you -- it's going to come out."

If it were merely what it purported to be -- the disclosure of a deviant father's treachery -- the videotaped exchange would be excruciating enough to watch.

But the truth is a good deal uglier than that.

Charges have been dropped. In fact, prosecutors now concede, much of what Brousseau told the boy during his Dec. 4 interrogation was a fabrication.

There were no videotapes depicting the boy in sexual situations with his father or sister. There was no new crime lab evidence confirming his sister's allegations, despite Brousseau's repeated assertions to the contrary.

Legal experts who have reviewed the videotaped interrogation, which was obtained by the Free Press, say it reveals multiple violations of the rules Michigan law prescribes for questioning juveniles who may have witnessed sexual abuse.

"I would not hesitate to use the word 'reprehensible,' " David Moran, associate dean of the Wayne State University School of Law, told me after watching the interrogation at the Free Press' request.

Brousseau didn't respond to voice-mail messages I left at his office and home. His supervisor, West Bloomfield Police Lt. Carl Fuhs, said he hadn't seen the videotape but defended Brousseau's motives.

"He didn't mean to harm anyone," Fuhs said. "The bottom line here is that the detective was trying to get to the truth. I don't know whether he went over the line or not."

Case dropped; damage remains

Last week, after a 105-day ordeal that began when a 14-year-old girl with autism, assisted by a teacher's aide at her Walled Lake high school, typed graphic allegations of sexual torture, Oakland County Prosecutor David Gorcyca announced that his office was dismissing criminal charges against the girl's parents and dropping its objections to the family's reunification.

The Free Press is withholding the parents' names to protect their children's anonymity.

The father had spent 80 days in jail without bond on three counts of first-degree sexual assault. His wife, whom prosecutors had charged with abetting her husband's alleged crimes, had been confined by an electronic tether, and their children had been dispatched to separate foster homes.

Prosecutors said the case collapsed when the girl, who cannot speak and communicates only by typing with the physical assistance of a paraprofessional facilitator, indicated that she was afraid of her father and was no longer willing to testify.

But attorneys for the girl's parents rejoined that their daughter's statement had been suspect from the beginning, and reported that she hugged and kissed her father and mother joyfully when the family was reunited last week. "This is a case that should never have been brought," said Jerome Sabbota, the father's lawyer.

In fact, the prosecution's case already had begun to unravel by Dec. 4, when the girl's 13-year-old brother, who has been diagnosed with a mild form of autism known as Asperger's syndrome, was brought in for questioning.

A psychologist who'd treated the girl warned police that the teacher's aide might have unconsciously authored the allegations against the girl's parents. And a nurse's examination revealed that the girl's hymen had three "nonacute" tears but remained intact, casting doubt on her supposed assertion that she had been raped repeatedly from the time she was 6 years old.

In hindsight, the boy's Dec. 4 interrogation can be understood as a desperate attempt to salvage a doomed prosecution -- a charade calculated to conjure credible evidence where none existed.

Former Wayne County Circuit Judge James Lacey, who retired in 2006 after presiding over juvenile cases for more than two decades, said Brousseau got off on the wrong foot by interviewing the 13-year-old without notifying his

family or Abbie Shuman, the lawyer a judge had appointed four days earlier to look out for the boy's interests.

"Anything he said in that situation, I would never admit into evidence," Lacey said.

Moran said the boy's youth and what Moran called obvious signs of an autistic disorder made the detective's use of deception and coercion especially difficult to excuse.

"The officer was using tactics that are used to break down adult criminal suspects," Moran said. "It's remarkable those tactics didn't work. But he did succeed in inflicting a lot of damage on an extremely vulnerable young man."

The damage is manifest in the videotaped interrogation when the boy admits that Brousseau's revelations about hard evidence supporting his sister's allegations have undermined his confidence in his father's integrity.

"It's not going to be the same anymore," he tells the detective, "because now I've lost my trust in my dad."

No threats or pressure allowed

Since the early 1990s, when a series of celebrated child abuse prosecutions against workers at the McMartin preschool in southern California ended in acquittals or hung juries, legislators and law enforcement officials across the nation have taken dramatic steps to protect juvenile witnesses from abusive interrogation and to minimize false allegations of sexual abuse.

Michigan's reform efforts culminated in a 1993 Forensic Interrogation Protocol, incorporated in the state's child abuse law, which lays out the ground rules for interviewing children and teenagers about suspected sexual abuse.

The protocol warns interviewers to avoid threats, promises and leading questions. It recommends that they pose open-ended queries without

betraying their "surprise, disgust, disbelief or other emotional reactions" to the juvenile witness' answers.

Lt. Fuhs said he didn't know whether Brousseau was familiar with the protocol. In any event, the detective appears to have ignored it throughout the Dec. 4 interrogation.

At one point in the interview, when the boy confesses doubts about his parents' innocence, Brousseau scoffs at his professed confusion:

Boy: I'm starting to believe that my dad might actually have --.

Detective: Let's stop it right there. You *know* what's been going on. You *know* it. You know firsthand what's been going on.

Boy: No! That's --

Detective: You're using this excuse, this crutch of "I *think* I know what's going on, or "I think I've got a *feeling*" -- Bullshit, man! You *know* what's going on, because you've experienced it firsthand."

Accusations and warnings

Later in the interview, under continuing pressure to recall anything that might be construed as inappropriate, the boy tells Brousseau that his father has helped shower his disabled sister, sometimes when both were naked, and once joked about seeing a mouse after the boy glimpsed the father's exposed penis.

"But do you know what?" Brousseau interrupts. "That's how it starts. And things gradually progress. They push the envelope a little bit further to see what they can get away with. So after that, how did it progress?"

Sandra McClennen, a psychologist who treated the autistic daughter for five years, said the girl frequently needed assistance with bathing, and that she was not alarmed to learn that the girl's father had sometimes helped her shower.

"She at times gets stuck, and her body kind of freezes," McClennen said. "Would it have been better if her father pulled on a pair of bathing trunks before helping her? Probably. But any parent of autistic children will tell you that some of the typical rules for how a family functions don't apply, because you have to adapt to the needs of the autistic child."

The Forensic Interviewing Protocol warns investigators not to express their own judgments while interviewing juvenile witnesses about suspected abuse.

Yet in his interrogation, Brousseau repeatedly challenges the 13-year-old's truthfulness, suggesting 35 times in the course of two hours that the boy is holding back.

"It's right on the tip of your tongue," he tells the boy at one point, "and you're kind of like teetering -- *Should I say it? Should I not say it?* ... I can't express to you the relief that you are going to feel when this is no longer a secret. It's an absolute enormous feeling."

On at least a dozen other occasions in the interview, Brousseau challenges the 13-year-old to "be the man" and "speak for your sister."

"You think you feel guilty *now*?" the detective says. "Wait till later. Wait till later, when that guilt just eats at you because you didn't do the right thing, you didn't help your sister."

Lawsuit is a possibility

Christine Henk, a speech and language pathologist who treated the boy for Asperger's syndrome for more than 10 years, said that no one from police or the prosecutor's office ever called her to ask about his condition, although Michigan's interviewing protocol recommends such a query. Henk, who viewed a video of the boy's interrogation at the Free Press' request, said that some of the behaviors Brousseau interpreted as signs of evasion or nervousness were classic Asperger's symptoms that surfaced under the stress of the confrontational interview.

"The rocking and the crying and the constant nose-wiping were all typical of" the boy "under extreme duress, especially when he was younger," Henk said. She said obvious manifestations of the boy's condition, such as an aversion to eye contact, had all but disappeared in recent years, but that they had clearly reemerged during the interrogation.

"Really, he held himself together very well," she said. "But there was some regression, and I think at some point he began to lose confidence in his own thoughts and memories."

Moran and attorney Alan Zweibel, who won a \$750,000 civil judgment against New York's Orange County after suing on behalf of two parents who lost custody of their child in a similar FC prosecution, agreed the boy's interrogation may yet see daylight in a civil action against police and prosecutors.

"There's definitely a potential lawsuit there," Moran said. "People who see it will be horrified."

Sabbota, the attorney who defended the boy's father, wouldn't speculate on the prospect of a civil lawsuit. But he worries that his client's 13-year-old son, who was separated from his parents for more than three months, may have a hard time understanding that he was deliberately deceived by the police.

Near the end of the Dec. 4 video, the weeping boy tells Brousseau: "I've lost the image I've had of my dad -- the image of a trustworthy person."

I'll bet a lot of municipal lawyers are already worrying about the price tag jurors might place on such a loss.

Contact **BRIAN DICKERSON** at 248-351-3697 or
bdickerson@freepress.com

BRIAN DICKERSON

Part two: Sex abuse case against Oakland couple was legal horror show

BY BRIAN DICKERSON • FREE PRESS COLUMNIST • MARCH 17, 2008

Second of two parts

Under cross-examination, McClennen was less circumspect. The parents, she insisted, "aren't guilty of this."

Charges dropped

Last week, more than three months after judges jailed the autistic girl's father, confined her mother to an electronic tether and dispatched the girl and her 13-year-old brother to separate foster homes, Oakland County Prosecutor Dave Gorcyca announced his office was dropping all charges and returning the children.

Gorcyca declined several invitations to discuss the case. Subordinates who filed papers dismissing multiple legal actions against the parents say they were hamstrung when the autistic daughter stopped cooperating with the investigation.

But that is disingenuous. In fact, police and prosecutors never established that the daughter has *ever* made credible allegations against her parents, nor even that she had authored the statements attributed to her.

The belated decision to drop charges ended a 100-day horror show marked by investigative ineptitude, prosecutorial tunnel-vision and judicial timidity.

It also begs a question of great consequence to other parents suspected of sexual abuse: How did the case get so far on so little evidence?

Facilitated what?

It is understandable that police and prosecutors reacted swiftly in late November when a high school administrator reported that an autistic

freshman at her Walled Lake school had accused her father of raping her for eight years.

"My dad gets me up, bangs me and then we eat breakfast," typed messages the school provided to the police said. "He puts his hands on my private parts mom knows and doesn't say anything." Other messages said her father had assaulted her in the shower and that her younger brother had fondled her breasts and genitals.

Prosecutors may also have been perplexed by the spectacle of the teenager typing responses to their questions as her paraprofessional facilitator, Cindi Scarsella, supported her typing arm.

Scarsella, a teacher's aide who had accompanied the autistic student to classes since the beginning of the school year after just two hours of training as a facilitator, told police the girl had spontaneously typed the allegations, while Scarsella supported her forearm, during a Learning Skills class in late November.

Prosecutors said the girl repeated the allegations -- again with Scarsella facilitating her typewritten answers -- in an interview at Care House, a facility that specializes in interviewing suspected victims of abuse.

Care House interviews are confidential, but Dr. James Todd, an Eastern Michigan University psychology expert who reviewed a video record of the girl's interview at the request of her parents' defense attorneys, testified that he detected signs that Scarsella was subtly directing the autistic girl's typing.

Scarsella, who did not respond to voice mails left at her home, has said under oath that she did not consciously or unconsciously influence the girl's responses.

"No one in our office had ever heard of facilitated communication," Oakland County Assistant Prosecutor Paul Walton said.

But the girl's parents believed the controversial method, whose proponents called it FC, had unlocked their speechless daughter's inner voice. Ironically,

it was the parents' faith in FC that convinced investigators the girl's facilitated accusations were authentic.

But if police and prosecutors had Googled the phrase "facilitated communication" as my Free Press colleague L.L. Brasier did when she first heard about the case, they would have learned that most educators and autism experts had long ago lost faith in FC, and that researchers had repeatedly failed to establish its legitimacy in controlled experiments.

Too good to be true

Conceived in Australia during the 1980s to help people suffering from cerebral palsy, FC was based on the theory that patients with impaired motor skills could learn to type with the help of facilitators who steadied their arms or slowed down their jerky movements.

The method piqued the interest of researchers at the University of Syracuse, which began training facilitators in FC with autistic children.

By 1990, parents who had never had meaningful exchanges with their autistic children were reporting seemingly miraculous breakthroughs. Overnight, youngsters who had never spoken or written a word were participating in classroom discussions, composing sophisticated poems, and articulating their affection for parents and teachers.

Or so it seemed.

But within a few short years, skeptics were pouring cold water on those anecdotal accounts.

Spurred by a flurry of cases in which autistic children using FC accused seemingly trustworthy adults of sexually molesting them, researchers began conducting double-blind experiments. In trial after trial, experimenters demonstrated that typed messages were actually being directed -- albeit unconsciously -- by the facilitators themselves.

Alan Zwiebel is a New York civil rights lawyer whose legal crusade against FC culminated in a celebrated 1997 case in which a federal jury awarded \$750,000 to a New York couple who'd lost custody of their retarded daughter. Jurors concluded officials knew or should have known the girl's facilitated allegations of abuse were bogus.

Zwiebel professed astonishment when I told him that Oakland County prosecutors had relied on FC evidence to bring criminal charges against the West Bloomfield girl's parents.

"Facilitated communication? My God -- I thought we stuck a stake through its heart in 1997," he said.

Since his 11-year-old federal case, Zwiebel said, "there's been a bright-line rule that facilitated communication is unreliable, period."

Too scared to proceed?

Barbara Morrison and Paul Walton, the assistant prosecutors who took over the West Bloomfield case from Dean in February, say they quickly became aware most experts had rejected FC.

The prosecutors also knew the case had been damaged badly when their autistic 14-year-old witness and her facilitator were unable to type responsive answers to any of 17 questions posed during a two-day court hearing in January:

Q: What color is your sweater?

A: JIBHJIH

Q: What are you holding in your hand right now?

A: I AM 14

The prosecution's case was further weakened when McClennen, the state's own expert witness, testified West Bloomfield police had rebuffed her when

she suggested a way to test the authenticity of her former patients' allegations.

McClennen said she had recommended a new interview using a "naive" facilitator -- one unfamiliar with the allegations -- but police blew her off.

In an interview Tuesday, Morrison and Walton said they had planned to use a new facilitator if their autistic witness was willing to go forward, but admitted they had never interviewed the girl with such a naive substitute present.

The two prosecutors said the girl had indicated through the original facilitator, Scarsella, that she was too scared of her father to go back to court. But the girl's parents and their attorneys say she hugged and kissed her mother, father and brother when she was reunited with them last week.

McClennen, who has not seen the family since they were reunited, said she believes her former patient is relieved to be home, but worries about repercussions.

"Everyone who she has had contact with for the last three months has behaved as if she was a victim of her parents and it wasn't safe for her to be with them," the psychologist noted in an interview last week. "I can't imagine what's in her head after 100 days of that."

A conspiracy of timidity

Legal experts such as David Moran, assistant dean of the Wayne State University School of Law, speculate that the girl's parents may soon return to court as plaintiffs in a civil suit against police and prosecutors who tore their family apart.

Among the lingering questions:

- Why did Gorcyca and his subordinates rely on allegations obtained using a method long rejected by courts, academics, and professional groups?

Gorcyca declined to discuss the case. Walton and Morrison say it took their office months to determine the girl's statements were not going to stand up in court. But that does not explain why prosecutors never interviewed the girl with a naive facilitator, as numerous experts had suggested.

- Why did Bloomfield Hills District Judge Marc Barron refuse to exclude statements obtained through FC even after the girl and her facilitator were unable to answer a single question in court?

Baron said it would have been premature to exclude the girl's statements before she had been given a chance to testify about the allegations. He speculated that the girl would have ultimately failed to pass a competency test, but added: "We never got to that point."

- Why was Abbie Shuman, the lawyer appointed to represent the children's interests, absent from key hearings in the case? Did Shuman do anything to expedite a resolution that could reunite her clients with their parents?

Shuman did not respond to four voicemails left over the course of a week.

- Why did Bloomfield Hills District Judge Diane D'Agostini decline to act last month when prosecutors abruptly reversed themselves and petitioned her to release the girl's father on bond?

D'Agostini said she was reluctant to set bond for the father even after prosecutors requested it because Barron was on vacation. An Oakland County Circuit judge eventually authorized bond for the father.

What seems beyond dispute is that police, prosecutors and judges missed repeated opportunities to confirm the girl's accusations by interviewing her with a naive facilitator, or interviewing her brother in a noncoercive setting.

No one should be surprised if Oakland County foots the bill for their carelessness.

Contact **BRIAN DICKERSON** at 248-351-3697 or bdickerson@freepress.com.

PRESS & GUIDE

Local man faces 20 years following sex sting

By Sean Delaney
, Press & Guide Newspapers

DEARBORN - A Dearborn resident was one of 27 men arrested as part of an Internet sexual predator sting operation conducted March 7-9 by the Michigan Attorney General's Office, the Wayne County Sheriff's Office and the Van Buren Township Police Department.

Mugilvannini Rajagopal, 30, has been charged with child sexually abusive activity and using a computer to communicate with another to commit a crime. If convicted, the Dearborn resident could be sentenced to up to 20 years in prison.

"Let this be a message to all those who would put children in harm's way — we're watching you," said Michigan Attorney General Mike Cox in a press release.

All 27 men — 26 from Michigan and one from New Jersey — were caught after chatting online with a person they thought was either an underage teenage boy or girl. The men are between the ages of 19 and 57.

During the chats, the men were invited to meet the child in an unoccupied home in Van Buren Township. When they arrived, Van Buren Township police officers and Wayne County Sheriff's Department deputies were there to greet and arrest them.

The undercover officers, who worked in connection with the Michigan Attorney General's Office, scheduled different times for the men to show up.

Four of the men arrived via taxi, while another was dropped off by his sister. One biked from Ypsilanti in 15-degree weather and another drove to the house on a flat tire that was shredded and worn to the rim by the time he arrived.

To law enforcement, that reinforces their believe that some of the men will go to extremes to set up a sexual tryst with a child.

"Even with the level of attention that these kinds of stings attract, the fact that so many men are still lining up to meet children for sex over the Internet should send shockwaves through the home of any parent," Wayne County Sheriff Warren Evans said in a press release.

The arrests were the result of a collaborative effort that had been in the works since October. A group that has attained national fame for being featured on the hit show "Dateline NBC: To Catch A Predator" was behind these arrests, as well.

Volunteers with Perverted-Justice.com posed as children in online chat rooms and carried on the conversations with the men. A video-audio surveillance company, Investigative Mechanics, also monitored the chats.

Van Buren police Capt. Greg Laurain said the arrests should send "a clear message that we are watching those who would put children in danger."

"We used the dark side of the Internet to do that," he said. "I think the fact that these guys think they can still get away with this stuff is pretty amazing."

Two men circled the house, but never got out of their vehicles. They, too, were arrested.

"At that point, we already have them on the Internet chat material," Laurain said. "The fact that these guys showed up to the house is just icing on the cake. They don't need to go into the house to be arrested."

Laurain said most of the suspects denied they were there for sex. All of the men were

searched and had their vehicles searched, if they arrived in one.

Condoms were found on a number of the men, Laurain said. One even brought an overnight bag, he said.

This sting was Perverted Justice's fifth largest in the number of arrests, according to the group's Web site.

In addition to the 27 who were arrested, several other men who chatted online with the decoys are also expected to be charged for sending sexually explicit material to someone they believed to be a child.

"Phase two is expected to arrest as many as, if not more than, the number of individuals arrested in phase one, bringing the total number of arrests to more than 50," Cox said.

"Law enforcement has a clear choice in dealing with the danger of Internet predators — either react after a child has been subjected to an assault or be proactive and intervene before they can harm a child. For us, this is an easy choice."

The 27 men arrested during the sting operation, including Rajagopal, were arraigned in 34th District Court and are being held on \$50,000 cash bonds. They are due back in court Wednesday for a preliminary examination of the evidence against them.

Heritage Newspapers Staff Writer Jason Alley and News Editor Austen Smith contributed to this report.

Contact Staff Writer Sean Delaney at (313) 359-7820 or sdelaney@heritage.com.

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Muskegon Chronicle

Group working to build new home for foster family

Saturday, March 15, 2008

By Chad D. Lerch

clerch@muskegonchronicle.com

GRAND HAVEN -- Jay and Sandy Allen of Fruitport know all about long lines for the bathroom.

With eight children -- three foster children and five adopted -- things can get hectic in their 900-square-foot home.

"You can't imagine the line for the bathroom. Sometimes, it stretches all the way down the hall," Sandy Allen said.

Soon, their surroundings may not feel so crowded, even with children ages 3, 4, 5, 6, 13, 15, 16, and 17.

A group of West Michigan businesses and volunteers have launched a \$150,000 fundraising effort to build the family a brand new house. Construction could begin as early as this summer.

Grand Haven Realtor Sandi Gentry said she met the Allen family at church three years ago and was moved by their story. She decided to do something about it.

Gentry filled out an application to get the family on the ABC-TV show "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," which receives 10,000 applications a week from across the country. The Allens didn't make the cut, but ABC officials encouraged Gentry to launch a local campaign to help the family.

Gentry assembled partners to be a "Dream Home Team" and began the campaign to help the Allens.

At first, the team wanted to renovate and expand the family's home at 3718 Pontaluna. But logistical problems made that too difficult, so the team embarked on plans to build a new house for the family.

Those plans, for a 2,600-square-foot home with seven bedrooms and 3 1/2 bathrooms, were unveiled Friday to a group of 40 people at the Grand Haven Community Center. The home would be built on the same lot as their current home on Pontaluna Road.

Their current home will be demolished.

Gentry also announced the fundraising goal, which she hopes to raise in 60 days. She encouraged business owners and volunteers Friday to reach out to churches, neighbors and businesses to make the project a reality.

"No donation is too small," Realtor Joyce Clegg, a Dream Home Team member, told supporters. "It sounds like a huge amount, but we can do it dollar by dollar."

A local Realtor's group made the first donation Friday: a check for \$1,000.

Construction won't start until the \$150,000 is in hand. If the team reaches the financial goal, the family would have a \$70,000 mortgage.

The family also saw the drawings of the \$220,000 house for the first time Friday.

"That's wonderful, truly unbelievable," Sandy Allen said.

The house would include a front porch, a two-stall garage, an attic, lots of storage and a laundry room off one of the entrances.

"Our mansion is in heaven, but this house will meet the needs of many children for years to come," Sandy Allen said. "This is about the foster kids. We want to encourage others to do foster care. There are so many kids in Michigan who need homes."

The group is working with Love INC (In the Name of Christ) to raise money for the family to cover expenses like heating and maintenance.

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Adoptee medical records could expose birth parents

Monday, March 17, 2008

By Kyla King

The Grand Rapids Press

Until she was reunited with her birth mother three years ago, Karen Kemme never knew the hereditary disease cystic fibrosis ran in her biological family.

Even so, the Allendale Township mother of three has serious concerns about a proposed state law supporters say would help adult adoptees in her situation.

A bill that soon could be voted on in the House would allow some adult adoptees to get information about their biological family's medical history, and possibly copies of their original birth certificate.

The proposal is controversial because, as written, it could also allow access to the names of birth parents even if they wish to remain anonymous.

"I think there should be consideration on both sides because it's a very emotional thing -- my (biological) brothers and sisters didn't even know about me. (My biological mother) had to sit down with her family and say, 'Listen, I had a baby I released for adoption when I was 16,'" said Kemme -- who, it turns out, does not carry the trait that causes breathing and digestion problems.

Bill sponsor Rep. Lisa Wojno, D-Warren, says the legislation is aimed at helping adoptees learn if they are at higher risk for cancer, hereditary diseases or illnesses.

But the bill has raised concerns at Grand Rapids-based adoption assistance agency Bethany Christian Services because, as now written, it could allow access to birth certificates that previously could not be accessed without the consent of the biological parent.

Adoption advocates worry pregnant women will be discouraged from choosing adoption because of privacy concerns, said Bethany spokesman John VanValkenburg.

"In many cases those records have been sealed for decades," VanValkenburg said. "That confidentiality has been there for sometimes very valid reasons."

Michigan law allows some adopted individuals to get birth certificates once they become adults. But for those adopted between May 1945 and September 1980, a copy of the original birth certificate showing the names of biological parents is available only with a court order. Otherwise, the documents are sealed.

State Rep. Fulton Sheen, R-Plainwell, opposed the bill when it passed out of committee saying it could violate confidentiality promises made to birth parents years ago. Sheen said the legislation is undergoing revisions he hopes will address privacy concerns before it comes for vote before the full House.

"I don't think we should be choosing whose rights are more important," Sheen said. "For those parents who don't want to be found, they ought to be able to give them the health information but have their names removed."

In Kemme's case, the 42-year-old used a confidential go-between at Bethany to make the initial contact with her birth mother, even though her birth mother had signed a form letting the state release her identity.

But even if her birth mother had not wanted to be identified, Kemme said she could have used the same

confidential process to exchange medical history information.

"There was no law stopping me from doing that," Kemme said. "It would have happened the same way."

Bonnie Baker Harris, a post-adoption specialist at Bethany, said the agency regularly helps adult adoptees and their biological parents confidentially share medical histories about allergies, heart disease and other conditions.

"Birth moms are usually very relieved to find out that is an option for them to help that child access that information without having to jeopardize their need for confidentiality," Baker Harris said. "Usually, that's because the birth mother never shared with anybody the fact that she did have a child and released this child for adoption."

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Fathers offered legal advice

Monday, March 17, 2008

GRAND RAPIDS -- Child advocates are offering information and legal advice about paternity, child custody, child support and parenting time to fathers at a Dad's Legal Clinic. The clinic will be 5:30-9 p.m. Wednesday at United Methodist Community House, 904 Sheldon Ave. SE. It is one of three statewide meetings to help fathers learn more about their rights and responsibilities as parents. Free pizza and beverages will be served, and child care is available. For more information, contact Kimberly Steed at (517) 432-8406 or the United Methodist Community House at (616) 452-3226.

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Child support program distributes \$1.4 billion

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LANSING - The Michigan Child Support Program increased the amount collected by more than \$16 million from fiscal year 2006 while the number of child support workers decreased.

Administered by the Department of Human Services, the Child Support Program distributed about \$1.4 billion in fiscal year 2007.

Of that number, \$1.28 billion went directly to Michigan families with more than \$37 million in medical support for children.

In addition, federal and state governments were reimbursed \$94 million for public assistance provided to families.

More than \$408 million in past-due support was collected and distributed to families - an increase of \$12 million over 2006.

"Looking at the overall collections, the numbers translate to each child support professional being responsible for collecting \$596,760 in 2007," said Marilyn Stephen, director of the Office of Child Support. "Child support professionals - including friends of the court, prosecuting attorneys and DHS child support staff - continue to do an excellent job for Michigan families."

In addition to insuring employers withhold court-ordered child support payments from wages and send the money to the state for disbursement to families, other enforcement tools can be used to collect support:

€ Revoking or denying passports for delinquent payers.

€ Suspending or denying driver's, professional or hunting licenses.

€ Intercepting federal and state tax refunds.

As a last resort, local courts can take actions including issuance of bench warrants to compel delinquent payers to support their children.

"The child support program continues to make great strides in collecting monies due to families through the use of various enforcement methods," DHS Director Ismael Ahmed said.

The uninsured

By Tanya Berkebile

Cadillac News

March 17, 2008

It has been a long time since Tony Holbrook has had health insurance. After being laid-off from a roofing job a few years ago, the Mesick man has to pick up odd jobs when he can. Although it allows him to pay the bills, none offer the option of health insurance.

During that time, Holbrook hadn't needed to see the doctor - until now. With the high cost of seeing a doctor without insurance, he decided to drive to Cadillac to be seen by a medical professional at the Community Health Clinic (CHC).

For two hours each week, health professionals donate their time to help ill patients who don't have any other option due to being uninsured and lacking the money to pay for the service. With unemployment close to 17 percent in northern Michigan, as well as other reasons, several communities do this type of charity care work.

"This area (northern Michigan) has the second highest number of uninsured in Michigan, after inner-city Detroit which is at about 18 percent," said Mercy Physician Hospital Organization Executive Director Victor Sztengel. "Along with that, there are a good number who are under insured. They have the benefits, but it doesn't cover everything - like mental health."



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In 2007, the CHC had 1,222 patient visits, almost 100 more patients from prior years. Of that number, 55 percent had one job, 15 percent had two or more jobs, while 30 percent were unemployed.

Although a high percentage of patients were employed, Sztengel said most don't have insurance because their employer doesn't offer health insurance or the patient can't or won't take it due to cost.

"Health care is expensive and depending on the state and local economy, many just can't afford it," he said. "And right now, the economy is poor."

Besides free clinics, the uninsured end up in hospital emergency rooms many times because there, they can't be turned away. For this reason, every year hospitals must budget a certain amount in charity care.

This year, Mercy Hospital Cadillac has already hit its budget of \$1.4 million in charity care. The amount of charity care has steadily been increasing year to year from about \$774,000 in 2004 to \$1,250,000 in 2007.

The growing healthcare burden of the uninsured and underinsured also is a problem Spectrum Health-Reed City hospital is facing, according to hospital Chief Financial Officer Tom Knoerl. The overall charity care for patients at Spectrum Health-Reed City has increased 39 percent this year, and is projected to reach \$900,000 by the end of its fiscal year in June. That number doesn't take into account the large number of bad debt in the emergency room.

"Our uncompensated care in the ER is up more than 60 percent from the same time last year," he said. "The majority of that number comes from people who are uninsured and go to the ER for care because they know they can't be turned away even if they aren't able to pay."

According to Bob Doering, director of mission services at Mercy Hospital Cadillac, it hurts hospitals financially to be the source of a last resort for those who can't pay for services. It might mean less money for raises or the hospital will have to go without new equipment for another year.

There are ways to keep the costs down, though, and that is through free clinics, health screenings and health awareness. For instance, if a person has the flu and doesn't see a doctor, it can get worse and turn into pneumonia. At that point, many times that person will go to the ER and the cost of treatment could be hundreds of dollars more than if initially treated.

"We like to fix the problem before it gets worse because it is cheaper," Knoerl said. "That is one of the reasons behind offering free flu clinics, health screenings and health awareness programs."

"It is less expensive for a hospital to give away a flu shot rather than have a person come to the ER and be treated for the flu or something worse."

tberkebile@cadillacnews.com | 775-NEWS (6397)

According to a report through Families USA, nearly two people die in Michigan each day because they don't have health insurance. This is due to people without insurance forgoing checkups, screenings and other preventive care. As a result, uninsured adults are more likely to be diagnosed with a disease - such as cancer - in an advanced stage, which greatly reduces their chance of survival.

Other points of the survey include:

- Between 2000 and 2006, the estimated number of adults between the ages of 25 and 64, in Michigan who died because they did not have health insurance was more than 4,200.
- Across the United States, in 2006, twice as many people in the same category died from a lack of health insurance as died from homicide.

- In the 2002 report, the Institute of Medicine estimated that 18,000 adults nationwide died in 2000 because they did not have health insurance. That estimate was later updated by the Urban Institute, which reported that at least 22,000 adults died in 2006 due to a lack of health insurance.